

Justice Minister's Award

My Way of Life

Sou Kobayashi, Seventh Grade (first year of three grades),
Urayasu City Takasu Junior High School, Chiba Prefecture

I have a disability. Why, you ask? I have no idea. I was born this way. I can walk now, but with difficulty. It is extremely hard for me to keep my body in balance, and I am unable to write, which is a critical handicap.

The oldest memory I have is of being in the pre-school. At the time, children aged three and older were all put in the same room. One of the kids who was a year older than I was once asked me, giggling, "Why do you fall down so easily, Sou? You're like a dead tulip." I replied, "How should I know?" Back then, I really didn't know why I was the way I was.

When I was in elementary school, though, I realized that this was my fate.

I remember a sports day. We performed a dance piece, and just as during practice when I kept dropping behind everyone else, I made a mistake on the actual day of the performance and took a wrong position, falling far behind others. I was mortified. I didn't shed any tears, but I cried out silently, "This is all my body's fault. I don't want such a useless body."

Some people say, "It must be tough to have a body like yours." Of course it is tough. For example, there is the bullying. I suppose it happens to people without disabilities, too, but the bullying that I put up with is an entirely different thing. Taunting the disabled is not bullying, it is downright discrimination.

Here is an anecdote of my experience. This year I went to a camp organized by the city. Being the oldest participant, I was named the captain of our group. The next day, the members of my group were making a lot of noise, so I told them to keep it down, all to no avail. The teachers needed to be on the scene, but unfortunately they were in a meeting. Not knowing what else to do, I said, "Hey, guys, be quiet!" in a loud, stern tone. The response I got was, "Shut up. Don't think you can boss us around, a disabled

kid like you.” Remarks like these really sting, and I get them all the time.

So far my stories have been all negative, but that does not mean my life is nothing but darkness. I have had some wonderful experiences, too. When I was in sixth grade, for example, I tried surfing for the first time. I had an opportunity to have a volunteer surfer teach me how to surf.

First, I was taken to this pool of water on the beach, by the sea, and practiced standing up on the surf board using a paddle called a SAP¹. After I grasped the basics, I went out into the sea. I wasn’t scared because there were many people around to support me. I started with bodyboarding, which involved riding the waves while lying down on the board, then once I got the hang of it, my next challenge was to stand up on the board. I fell, naturally. I’m not nimble enough to be able to hold the board flat on the wavy surface of the water and stand up on it. I fell into the sea many times, nearly drowned and had to crawl up each time onto the board. I wanted to quit, but my coach wouldn’t allow it. He said, “Don’t use your disability as an excuse. You can do it, if you try. I know you can. I’ll help you if you really need me to.”

As time passed, my legs became increasingly heavy. I was reaching the limits of my strength. I gave up and asked the coach to let me stop after five more tries. On the second try of the five, the coach yelled, “Here comes a good wave. Go, Sou!” I summoned up what strength I had left and braced myself to stand up, just as I was taught earlier. I concentrated all my energy in my knees and legs, and rose to my feet.

I was standing on the board! For the first time in my life, I had moved in a slow motion. It was amazing! I did it! Me, actually riding a wave!

Before I knew it, I was off the board and in the water. By the time I got out of the sea, I was exhausted but felt fantastic. Everything felt incredible as I rode the wave: the breeze, the sound of the sea, and above all, I gained confidence in myself. I could surf. I couldn’t do a thing at first, but I tried and succeeded. Disabilities or no disabilities, it doesn’t matter. The only question is whether I am willing to take the challenge. The surfing experience has taught me to believe in myself, that anything is possible and I have nothing to be afraid of. And I have the coach and the people who supported me to thank for the way I now feel.

¹ It may mean “SUP” (stand up paddle).

I have a disability. I've had my share of unpleasant experiences and I face difficulties every day. I've also had people treat me with kindness just as many times, and so I get by each day, happy and well. I do hope that our society becomes one in which everyone is respectful and generous to each other and does not hurt people. In such a society, each person would be able to live their lives to the fullest.

From now on, I will always hold appreciation for those around me. I'm going to learn to cope with this disabled body of mine, and although I may need some support, I will live by the conviction that I can do anything if I try. Disabled or not, I'm going to live my life my own way. It may not always look pretty, but that is the way of life I choose.